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Hà Nội Sidewalks: Mediating Urban Order in Common Spaces

Hà Nội sidewalks are public spaces that various social groups appropriate and utilize for their own social, political, and economic purposes. Sidewalks serve not only pedestrians but also as common spaces for dynamic livelihood activities as well as democratic, cultural, and social networking practices. Indeed, Hà Nội's sidewalks have been crucial spaces for urban communities where different social groups interact, discuss, and engage in social and economic exchange. People from disadvantaged groups also use sidewalks to earn a living. Activities taking place on the urban pavement have contributed to nurturing and enriching the material and spiritual aspects of urban cultural life for both residents and migrants. Ultimately, these activities are a defining feature of Vietnamese cities.¹

As scholars have shown, urban authorities at all levels of the city who apply a “modern approach” often consider daily sidewalk activities as “traffic-obstructing,” “disorderly,” and unattractive and complain that they make Hà Nội a “sleazy,” “uncivilized,” “unmodern,” or “backward” city compared to other international metropolises.² Like other cities in Vietnam, since the first decade of the 2000s, Hà Nội has implemented a series of disciplinary policies and activities to “clean up” and reorganize the sidewalk. Those campaigns started as “Neat houses, clean streets, beautiful capital” [*Gọn nhà, sạch phố, đẹp thủ đô*] in the late 1980s and moved to “Retaining

sidewalks for pedestrians” [*Giành lại vỉa hè cho người đi bộ*] in recent years. At the end of 2016, the problem of sidewalks as a source of social disorder became popular in the mass media. Hà Nội leaders responded with what the press called “the iron fist campaign” [*chiến dịch bàn tay sắt*] to restore sidewalk order, starting in Hoàn Kiếm district and eventually spreading to other parts of the city. In Hồ Chí Minh City, a similar campaign was even more dramatic when vice chairman of District 1, Đoàn Ngọc Hải, went to clean up the sidewalk himself, vowing to deal strictly with violations in an effort to return sidewalks to pedestrians. However, this campaign failed miserably and Đoàn Ngọc Hải was forced to resign at the start of 2018. The press in Hà Nội took pleasure in mocking the failures of these campaigns to make any substantive changes, using idioms like “a cat remains a cat” or “the stone throws a pond” to ridicule the authorities’ futile efforts.³

This failure to reintroduce sidewalk order raises many questions about the relationship between the state and sidewalk users that I take up in this article. I approach sidewalks as heterotopic spaces of “commoning” shaped by diverse cultural practices and social agents who use and understand sidewalks in ways that offer important insights into urban life unfolding in the streets. By “commoning,” I mean practices that give shape to a “set of spatial relations” that are distinct from public and private spaces and that create multidimensional forms of “life-in-common” that deviate from state rules.⁴

In *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, James C. Scott discusses state regulation and management of society.⁵ He analyzes state efforts to standardize social life and reduce its complexities in order to make the everyday more legible and thus governable, in other words, to create social order. These grand state schemes, however, even if intended to bring positive benefits to the population, often fail owing to their simplification of complex social phenomena. This theoretical point is particularly applicable to sidewalks in Hà Nội, which have multifunctional uses that appropriate space and challenge state control through commoning practices that offer insights into ways of belonging in the city.

In his pathbreaking book, *Wards of Hanoi*, David Koh studies differences in mechanisms of management and control across scales: from the

macro-level state, where policy is made, to the implementation of those policies at the grassroots ward level. He argues that while control mechanisms at the state level appear very rigid, they tend to loosen as the scale shifts downward, eventually becoming instruments of compromise at the local level. This also appears to be the case with sidewalk regulations, which appear as strict directives at the city level but relax at the level of the ward and ease up even more so in the streets themselves when homeowners become involved.

Drawing on Scott's and Koh's approaches, I emphasize the ambiguity of sidewalk life in relation to dominant expressions of state and nonstate power. By ambiguity I mean that the ownership and regulation of sidewalk spaces and their uses are never fixed. While many people consider sidewalks a shared space for use by all regardless of status, others claim the right to dictate the terms of the use of such space in front of their houses. For this reason, I consider sidewalks in Hà Nội as a kind of competing commons—distinct from private or wholly public space—where people share a sense of belonging but at the same time maintain competing and overlapping claims to use the pavement for their own interests. As I show below, the complex and contradictory nature of such manifestations of the commons as exceptional spaces contributes to shaping everyday sidewalk practices and their always-mediated rules of use from within and beyond the state.

Research for this essay was conducted between 2018 and 2019 in three administrative districts in Hà Nội. Ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews focused on four target groups whose commoning practices defined the form and use of sidewalk economies: itinerant street vendors, settled inhabitants, transient customers, and urban authorities. I show how these four groups are in constant negotiation with one another as they engage in their own forms and methods of *làm luật* [law-making]. *Làm luật* reminds us that sidewalks are important sites where people negotiate community and forms of belonging by making claims to the city and to maintaining accessibility to common space.

Hà Nội Sidewalks: Multifunctional and Common Space

Researchers have shown sidewalks to be vibrant cultural sites of ongoing contestations and contradictions.⁶ While authorities consider the sidewalk functionally as a public space to mainly serve pedestrians moving through

the city, users often consider sidewalks as spaces of social and economic opportunity that necessitate temporary suspensions to mobility. Local authorities see mobility as ensuring safety; if the sidewalk is used for commerce or living, mobility is impeded and thus creates disorder. Decree 36-CP of May 29, 1995, “Ensuring road traffic safety and urban traffic order and safety” [*Bảo đảm an toàn giao thông đường bộ và trật tự an toàn giao thông đô thị*], is a case in point. This decree assigned responsibility to urban and provincial People’s Committees to relieve encroached roadways and sidewalks by ensuring assigned, single-purpose use, for example, of roads for motor vehicles and sidewalks for pedestrians only.

The regulation on the management and uses of sidewalks and roadways in Hà Nội also clearly stated this principle: “The pavement serves mainly pedestrians.”⁷ Accordingly, use for other purposes, such as weddings, funerals, food sales, or parking, is only temporary and requires the authorities’ permission. Hà Nội leaders have identified 2014, 2015, and 2016 as years of “urban order and civilization” [*Năm trật tự và văn minh đô thị*]. The campaign against sidewalk encroachment [*lấn chiếm vỉa hè*] was deployed even more strongly in 2017 with the synchronous participation of several urban forces deployed widely across the country, especially in Hà Nội. Leaders took a tough stance through statements that showed their determination to “reclaim the sidewalk for pedestrians,” borrowing from wartime mobilization phrases and slogans. This included terms such as the “iron hands campaign” [*chiến dịch bàn tay sắt*] and a “declared battle” [*tuyên chiến*] against the misuse of sidewalk spaces. Authorities envisioned themselves as launching [*ra quân*] an attack unexpectedly [*xuất kích*] on those who encroached on the pavement in ways that disrupted urban order through activities that include vending, hairdressing, maintenance and repair, and so on. These forms of livelihood making, and waiting for work, were considered encroachments that caused chaotic and uncivilized sidewalk conduct unsuitable for a modern hygienic city like Hà Nội.

Many planning specialists, researchers, and Hà Nội residents have disagreed with these actions and perspectives. Mr. Nguyễn Hữu Khiêm, former deputy director of the National Academy of Public Administration, explained in article:

The view that defines the sidewalk as only for pedestrians has become one-sided and nonhistorical . . . In objective practices, the urban administration invokes the so-called “clearing up to return the pavement to pedestrians” argument to serve plans for reorganizing the sidewalks. However, it does so by disregarding the fact that the sidewalk has other diverse functions.⁸

Mr. Lê Hồng Giang, a blogger who writes about sidewalks, expressed the opinion that “today, sidewalks in particular and urban infrastructure in general still need to be used in a balanced manner. We cannot exclusively save the sidewalk for pedestrians.”⁹ From an economic point of view, Mr. Nguyễn Xuân Phương, an economist at the state bank, said in an interview: “There is no country where the sidewalks are for pedestrians only, because it is very wasteful and unreasonable. There is always a mutual combination of walking, business, service, and living space.” These experts appreciate the multifunctionality of sidewalks as a kind of civic space,¹⁰ which creates a sense of inclusion based not on individual ownership or state control of urban space but on sharing for economic, social, and other purposes.

Sidewalks as a type of commons was emphasized to me in interviews. For example, one woman on Trần Nhân Tông Street told me, “The sidewalk is the communal house of everyone,” while another person, a man on Lương Văn Can Street, claimed that “the sidewalk is everyone’s property.”

Mrs. Phương, who works on Quang Trung Street, explained in more detail: “I think the pavement is a common area shared by the people. In theory, the sidewalk is state property, but each family thinks they have rights to use the sidewalk in front of their house.” In practice, however, other people widely engage in activities on the sidewalk as if it were a shared space. “The sidewalk undoubtedly belongs to many people,” Mr. Phạm Xuân Nga—a resident of Lý Thái Tổ Street—stated. “It is not relevant to say whether it belongs to the state or individuals. It must be something shared between every actor involved in the management or use of sidewalks.” These statements show that people tend to understand sidewalks as spaces of overlapping forms of common tenancy or multi-ownership created and maintained by multiple subjects.

While this view confirms previous research that has shown “sidewalk culture” to be a unique feature and character of collective urban life in Vietnam,¹¹ my approach differs in my attention to the particular ways in

which space is negotiated by multiple actors at different levels to show ambiguities in the urban regulation of sidewalks. Rather than take a top-down approach, I examine how different groups *làm luật*, or make law, in their efforts to exploit sidewalk opportunities for social, economic, and other benefits.

Sidewalk Cooperations

Despite the messiness of sidewalk cultures, the people who participate in creating and maintaining them can be divided into four main groups who each exploit sidewalk space in different ways. The first is the group of people who own street-facing houses (local residents [*dân ở tại*]). The second group includes people who rent these houses, usually only the first floor to run their businesses. Roaming street vendors constitute the third group. The fourth group comprises customers who consume various sidewalk services. These groups interact with one another in very different ways, influencing how the sidewalks are used and managed and how the “law,” or the rules of the street, is made.

Residents who own street-facing houses tend to consider the sidewalks in front of their property as their own.¹² Nonetheless, they are often willing to negotiate with other actors, especially street vendors, who may occasionally sell goods on “their” pavement. Scholars have shown that sentimental or sympathetic [*trình cảm*] relations can develop over time between house owners and regular itinerant vendors, the latter of whom are considered poor and in need.¹³ While homeowners may offer vendors helpful assistance, such as hiding goods when police approach,¹⁴ there are also tacit temporal limitations to the act of selling on or close to private property to remind the vendor that they should move on. On the other hand, the assistance is mutual: mobile vendors offer convenience by bringing goods and services directly to people’s homes.

Tenants try to maximize the use of space inside and outside to grow their businesses. Sidewalks are usually part of their profit calculation. For example, Mr. Ba, a coffee shop owner on Quang Trung Street explained, “There is a lot of pressure to run a business. I have to make the most of the sidewalk to expand the space for our café. Our customers also prefer to sit outdoors to

get fresh air.” Sidewalks then become sites of competition between rent-paying tenants and itinerant vendors, with whom they also must negotiate.

There are both spatial and temporal dimensions to these negotiations, especially for sedentary vendors who rent fixed sidewalk spaces. For example, Ms. Luyện, who is sixty-eight years old and sells meat on Trần Xuân Soạn Street in front of a private house, pays a monthly fee to the house’s owner to occupy the space for her small morning business. She explained her time-sharing agreement with other vendors, who pay her a fee to oral subcontract her space at other times of the day: “At this spot, I sell meat in the morning, while another vendor sells rice here at lunchtime. In the afternoon you will find a tea stall here.” In addition to sharing the space, the women also share the costs of the periodic fines [*phạt*] paid discreetly to local officials, such as the ward police, for “violating the order and safety of the streets.” Such space- and fine-sharing arrangements can be found in the city center, the area of my research. In another example, in a narrow alley off of Hàng Buồm Street with nine households, family members divide the day into three shifts of morning, afternoon, and evening to sell goods in front of the alley’s entrance.

Normally, sedentary vendors are dependent on families or tenants who “own” the sidewalk and adjacent houses. In return for an established business presence, these vendors are expected to pay a kind of rental fee for securing their selling space. For instance, the owner of a coffee shop on Thi Sách Street allows a vendor to sell vegetables in the morning for a fee of two million Vietnamese đồng per month. This money helps the small businesses cover their expenses. For example, the lessee of a photocopy shop on Trần Xuân Soạn Street pays the landlord eight million đồng a month in rent, but earns back three million đồng from a vendor who sells foodstuff outside the entrance, who often helps with parking or motorbikes. The above-mentioned examples indicate that there are always agreements among different actors involved in exploiting the sidewalk to maximize business opportunities. At the same time, these arrangements are not driven by economic imperatives alone but are created and sustained through acts of empathy or based on *biết ý* [implicit knowledge] or *biết điều* [reasonable understanding] of respective spatial and temporal boundaries.

Itinerant street vendors, who cooperate with one another to decrease the risks to which they may be exposed, also need to negotiate with homeowners and tenants. While there is some tolerance expressed toward these typically poor, middle-aged women who come from rural areas to peddle their goods, there are limits to residents' understanding. As one elderly man explained, "They cannot occupy whatever space they want. There must be a walking path. And shop owners must be able to arrange their tables outdoors neatly." This requires *biết ý*, or reading the situation. The vendors themselves are conscious of minimizing the impact of their work on the general public and other vendors, and they try to keep order so as to prevent disputes. But they are also quick to take advantage of open sidewalk opportunities, which require them to react quickly. "I must always keep my eyes on the sidewalks and move quickly, like to replace a soup vendor right at the moment that they have finished working," a female vendor from Thái Bình Province outside Hòm Market explained. Another form of *biết ý* as a form of conflict avoidance materializes in the awareness that itinerant vendors should stay away from shops or other vendors selling similar items. "No one has the right to compete with another who has already arrived," Ms. Hoa, a seventy-five-year-old vendor on Hàng Bạc Street warned.

Not only the vendors, but other service providers on the sidewalk are also conscious to maintain the peace between different actors who might be in competition over space. As such, shoe shiners, motorbike taxi drivers, hairdressers, and locksmiths all engage in practices of mediation with one another to secure a productive place on the sidewalk to work. Mr. Hùng, a motorbike taxi driver on Huế Street, affirms, "There is a very little scrambling among us drivers to occupy a convenient place. We understand that it is already hard for all of us to earn a living."

Negotiating Sidewalk Governance

According to official regulations, Hà Nội sidewalks are under the management of the urban district and ward. Those who wish to run a business on the sidewalk must apply for permission from these administrative levels. These two levels make up an interagency force to implement, inspect, and propagandize the state's policies related to maintaining orderly sidewalk conduct. This "functional force" [*lực lượng chức năng*] may include the

police (either criminal or traffic), civil defense squads, construction and traffic inspectors, land surveyors, or others charged with urban management. The sudden appearance of any of these forces to “clean up” the sidewalk is a common public spectacle. As the inspector arrives suddenly, shop owners hurry to clear the area of plastic tables and chairs, while street vendors quickly run into alleys to hide their wares, often with the assistance of neighbors who might guide them regarding where to run. Within seconds, the sidewalk becomes “clean.” However, right after inspectors have left, the pavement returns to its previous state. Avoidance of inspectors has become a daily cultural practice on Hà Nội’s streets. When I spoke to a shoe store owner on Hàng Dầu Street about sidewalk culture, she replied: “I have no idea what sidewalk culture is, but the hundreds of ways to run away from the police and other forces of order [*đội trật tự*] might also be a kind of culture, right?” Vendors, in particular, consider the police their “nemesis” [*khắc tinh*]. Thus, there is a need to remain watchful, vigilant, and ready to respond, especially on special occasions, such as National Day, when the forces increase their rounds and put even more pressure on residents to “clean up” the streets.

The rhythm of chasing, catching or outrunning, and returning has also become a familiar scene and experience for observers in Hà Nội. One photographer who is a regular guest of a tea stall in the Old Quarter, recounted, “Almost every time I take a seat on the sidewalk for iced tea, a chase begins.” Interestingly, some customers show their skills, exiting with a teacup in one hand and a chair in the other. According to the photographer, “Someone like myself, who is familiar with the situation, automatically reacts by standing up to run.” Like many of my respondents, he commented on the networks that suddenly appear to assist vendors with their escape, guiding them into an alley or another hidden space.

The need to respond swiftly to the police influences the ways in which people carry out their businesses. For example, shopkeepers may use plastic chairs and light tables for easy folding. Canvas or cloth covers are often on hand. Likewise, some street vendors have switched from using bamboo yokes while walking to baskets with bicycles for quicker movement. Another strategy to minimize loss is to divide goods: carrying some wares to vend, while others remain hidden and covered elsewhere—a backup stock if goods

are confiscated. Relying again on their implicit knowledge, they avoid peak times, when the police forces are known to do their rounds, like mornings or special events. One woman who owns a tea stall on Hàng Buồm Street explained her efforts to try to maintain the order of the streets, despite the impact on her business: “I often close my stall whenever a large event takes place.” In this way, vendors who are often thought to be the root of disorder show themselves to be complicit with state policy, even buying into the idea of a “clean and beautiful city.” This implicit knowledge about when to be absent from the sidewalk also helps to maintain good relations with the urban law and order forces, even winning their sympathy to some degree.

It can be difficult for urban inspectors to catch and fine traders because of the networks of actors who often assist with escape. Another evasion strategy is to develop social relationships [*quan hệ xã hội*] with homeowners, shop keepers, or other people in neighborhoods where vendors sell their goods. These contacts might be useful in the event of a pursuit. For example, traders might take brief cover in a nearby building where they are familiar with the security guard. In interviews, respondents expressed sympathy toward vendors who have had their goods confiscated; this sympathy benefits both sides, as I argued above.

Despite such coping mechanisms, most sidewalk vendors have at one point been caught and fined and suffered the confiscation of their goods. They try to appeal to the enforcer’s sympathy with an apology or with stock phrases like “This was just my first time” or “This has been a slow day for me,” hinting at their economic precarity. Or, they accept their fate and just pay the fine.

Làm Luật on the Sidewalk

Sidewalk vendors also employ another strategy, known as *làm luật*, an unofficial way to dodge the rules. There are many forms of *làm luật*, such as offering gifts, occasional monetary contributions, or “tips” [*bồi dưỡng*] or regular monthly payments to inspectors, sometimes through an intermediary (as discussed above). It is worth mentioning that these acts of law-making are illegal and go along with implicit agreements and expectations on behalf of the enforcers. They are also considered necessary, unavoidable,

and, most importantly, unchangeable—the natural order of things that people have become used to [*đã quen rồi*].

According to my respondents, there is a clear distinction between the dos and don'ts of law-making. Those who have fulfilled their expected law-making duties will have earned a relatively undisturbed selling place on the sidewalk. Those who have not *làm luật* will face more visits and discipline. They may get reminders or hints that they are expected to understand, such as “Tết is almost here” or “the warden is going on vacation soon.” A good vendor knows how to read the signs: an inspector’s “request” to buy cigarettes, for example, may be a demand to gift them—an act referred to as “xin đều.” These tacit agreements, if not subtle intimations, make the work of clearing the pavement seem to be just perfunctory [*làm lấy lệ*], or a form of pretending [*làm ra vẻ*], acting [*làm màu*], or performing [*trình diễn*]. At times, respondents expressed their dissatisfaction or annoyance with the everyday practices of *làm luật* that shaped their access to public sidewalks. One man, a café owner, was especially critical: “Robbers act at night, officials in the daylight” [*cướp đêm là giặc, cướp ngày là quan*].

Despite their annoyance with law-making, vendors also recognized the compromises that authorities often made. For their part, urban law-and-order forces saw themselves as engaged in difficult but necessary work. According to one police officer in Hai Bà Trưng district, “We cannot control the pavement twenty-four hours a day”; thus, concessions have to be made. David Koh makes a similar observation about the “dual roles” that officials—positioned between the party-state and the local community—play while implementing urban policy. Indeed, Koh explains that there is a “lack of clear differentiation between public and private roles.” When the values of these two roles clash, mediation often occurs, thus diluting one’s sense of state authority while enhancing the sense of belonging to the local community.¹⁵

It can be said that both state representatives and sidewalk “residents” are constantly negotiating tacit agreements to enable the shared, “appropriate” use of sidewalk space—appropriate being defined spatially (how close to a home or business) and temporally (at what time of day). This relationship reveals an ongoing compromise between regulations and sentiment, between law and sympathy, between historical economic practices and “civilized” urban regulations. These negotiations aim for mutual benefits [*đôi bên cùng*

có lợi] in order to avoid making difficulties for one another [*đôi bên không làm khó cho nhau*]. While the law in theory may be unwavering [*cường quyết*], in practice it is implemented with “closed eyes” [*nhắm mắt cho qua*]. This process results in a “daily politics” at the scale of the neighborhood that unfolds around Hà Nội’s sidewalks, as Sarah Turner and Laura Schoenberger point out.¹⁶ It is equally important to note the flexibility in the ways that regulations are enacted on the ground and the role that *biết ý* plays in dissolving rigid rules into practices of law-making. Sidewalk spaces are thus sites of mediations and negotiations among different groups of people—each deploying different strategies to differing ends—as well as between people and authorities. As such, sidewalks are contradictory spaces of bargaining whereby all benefits are shared.¹⁷

Conclusion: Rethinking the “Messiness” of Hà Nội Sidewalks

As I have pointed out in the above sections, a sidewalk is not only an architecture of space that directs movement through the city as per its assigned function, but also a social space for everyday life that exhibits the complexity of a rapidly changing urban society. Sidewalks serve as a conduit for flows of goods and information; they facilitate social relations and economic practices that are mediated by time and space as well as by interactions between and among social actors, both state and nonstate. They are dynamic sites of constant change and negotiation, as “law” is made and remade to fit different needs. Sidewalks in Hà Nội are diverse sites for ethnographic observation and storytelling that help us to understand the richness but also the contingent nature of cultural, economic, legal, and political practices in the capital city. Sidewalks are more than banal architecture integral to urban design; they generate identities, showcase urban vitality, and represent the soul of the city.

State representations of sidewalks often attach a negative meaning to their unplanned use and complexity. Where some see vitality, the state sees messiness [*nhếch nhác*] and the appropriation of public space for individual objectives. A host of terms typically used in state media, including in public address systems [*loa phường*], capture this ambivalence: “basket businesses” [*buôn thùng bát mẻt*] and “spontaneous trading” [*kinh doanh tự phát*] are

held responsible for creating “unhygienic” [*mất vệ sinh*], “anti-aesthetic” [*thiếu thẩm mỹ*], and “noisy” [*ồn ào*] neighborhoods. Campaigns to restore urban order by “reclaiming the sidewalk” target small traders rather than larger forms of urban pollution, like construction, even as traders contribute to state goals of poverty alleviation and urban “development.” These actions toward sidewalks are representative of the “simplification” and “standardization,” in Scott’s terms,¹⁸ that modern states apply to manage and control populations. As Scott argues, simplification to create order out of complexity and to confer legibility on the state paradoxically creates new complexities that turn people’s lives upside down.

In Hà Nội, authorities apply a similarly simplified approach to facilitating sidewalk management, demonstrating a singular perspective or standard for all pavement situations. In attempting to follow predetermined regulations defined within an “urban civilization” framework, managing agencies often fail to achieve their objective of a clean, neat, orderly, and “modern” city. This is because of the various forms of law-making that facilitate the shared or adjacent uses of sidewalk space at particular times of the day according to multiple negotiations between social actors within and beyond the state. In many cases, as Lisa Barthelmes points out, Vietnamese state practices allow for a certain degree of permissiveness when enforcing regulations,¹⁹ which traders know intuitively through *biết ý*. These paradoxes of urban governance have been noted in the literature. However, the literature has neglected to acknowledge the temporal, spatial, and relational particularities of the mediations I have discussed at length above.

Many studies of urban life, such as *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*,²⁰ *Everyday Urbanism*,²¹ and *Cities for People*,²² argue for the importance of streets and sidewalks for creating community and safety in cities. Urban vitality and security should not be measured by beautiful lawns, straight lines of trees, or orderly rows of houses, but by the vital social and economic activities that bring people into public spaces, such as street-corner markets, street food stalls, outdoor vendors, and second-hand markets. Urban theorists Lisa Drummond and David Koh assert that Hà Nội sidewalks are *civic* spaces of engagement that are integral to modern life.²³ I have shown, on the other hand, that they are also *shared* spaces of mediation that offer a sense of urban belonging, despite competing claims to

“ownership.” All of these observations challenge top-down perspectives by embracing the “messiness” of sidewalk lives as the norm rather than the exception. A bottom-up, inside-out view can thus reveal the inherent complexities and contradictions of urban sidewalks, which help to create and maintain social relationships, some of which are built on principles of solidarity, empathy, and trust. Regular trading, eating, drinking, and information exchanges on sidewalks bring people social capital that in turn enables economic and other benefits in people’s attempts to optimize their social positions relative to the pavement. As I have shown, accommodations between users of urban sidewalks establish a counter-“sidewalk order,” which residents take seriously and follow according to accepted law-making practices.

This alternative sidewalk order represents a fraught compromise between the multiple social groups who directly participate in or influence pavement livelihoods. There is an inclusive, democratic nature to this order in which all people have certain affordances to use public space for the benefit of all sides. This order has its own form of regulations, as I have shown; it is not lawless. It also follows its own “civilizing” logics that differ from those of the state, which risks creating a “soulless order” of a monotonous, lifeless city through its adherence to top-down, aesthetic planning.²⁴ However, as my study shows, lively and busy sidewalks have created their own counter-aesthetic practices that contribute to the making of a vibrant, economically beneficial city.

Sidewalk lives, with their inherent complexities, negotiated orders, thickness of local knowledge, diversity of cultural practices, and multidimensional connections of social relations, have created a sidewalk culture that has been effectively built and operated by people since the construction of pavement more than a century ago under French colonial planning. Sidewalks users have become skilled, experienced, creative, adaptable, and active negotiators of urban space. Although the state might try to impose its power on the management of pavements, I have shown how variously positioned groups utilize the pavement to their advantage in accepted ways defined by citizens and not the state. Thus, various states’ attempts to impose standardized forms via campaigns to restore urban order and “retain sidewalks for pedestrians” [*giành lại vỉa hè cho người đi bộ*] have been unsuccessful.

The pavement is a type of commons that displays a diversity of urban lives and cultural practices. Additionally, the management of sidewalks has

also shaped those sidewalk cultural practices. These are not separate but interwoven in how they co-constitute one another to create multifunctional, multi-“owned,” and multifaceted pavement spaces. Understanding sidewalk culture allows us to grasp the complexities of urban life and how struggles over livelihoods are mediated between and among state and nonstate actors who actively contribute to the making and remaking of Vietnamese cities.

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ABSTRACT

Hà Nội sidewalks are one of the public spaces that various social groups appropriate and utilize for their own social, political, and economic purposes. Concentrating on the insiders' point of view, this study offers a close look at how people's practices create a unique sidewalk culture that affirms the importance of sidewalks in creating a more dynamic city. The article focuses on discussing the pavement as a particular cultural space, a space maintained by the arrangements and negotiations of cultural agency. The pavement is not messy, sleazy, or out-of-date but orderly, flexible, humane, and rich in identity.

KEYWORDS: *Hà Nội sidewalk, sidewalk culture, arrangements and negotiations*

Notes

1. See Rolf Jensen, Donald M. Peppard Jr., and Vũ Thị Minh Thắng, “Di cư ‘Tuần hoàn’ của phụ nữ Việt Nam: Một nghiên cứu về người bán hàng rong tại Hà Nội,” *Tạp chí Xã hội học* 2, no. 106 (2009): 59–71; David W. H. Koh, *Wards of Hanoi* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006); David Koh, “The Pavement as Civic Space: History and Dynamics in the City of Hanoi,” in *Globalization, the City and Civil Society in Pacific Asia: The Social Production of Civic Spaces*, ed. M. Douglass, K. C. Ho, and Giok Ling Ooi (London: Routledge, 2008), 145–174; Annette Miae Kim, *Sidewalk City: Remapping Public Space in Hồ Chí Minh City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Sarah Turner, Noelani Eidse, and Natalie Oswin, “Contesting Street Spaces in a Socialist City: Itinerant Vending-Scapes and the Everyday Politics of Mobility in Hanoi, Vietnam,” *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 106, no. 2 (2016): 340–349.
2. For more information regarding this point, see Linh An, “Hà Nội quyết ‘làm sạch’ vỉa hè cho người đi bộ,” *BNews*, March 10, 2017, <https://bnews.vn/ha-noi-quet-lam-sach-via-he-cho-nguoi-di-bo-/37648.html>.
3. See Nguyễn Văn Cảnh, “Lập lại trật tự vỉa hè Hà Nội, không để ‘ồn ào rồi lại dịu êm,’” *Thể thao & Văn hóa*, March 7, 2017, <https://thethaovanhoa.vn/dien-dan-van-hoa/lap-lai-trat-tu-via-he-ha-noi-khong-de-on-ao-roi-lai-diu-em-n20170307151339896.htm>; Phi Hùng, “Vỉa hè Hà Nội đẹp xong lại... vẫn như cũ,” *Pháp Luật thành phố Hồ Chí Minh*, August 10, 2017, <https://plo.vn/via-he-ha-noi-dep-xong-lai-van-nhu-cu!-post448796.html>.
4. Stavros Stravides, *Common Space: The City as Commons* (London: Zed Books, 2016).
5. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).
6. For example, see Turner, Eidse, and Oswin, “Contesting Street Spaces”; Kim, *Sidewalk City*.
7. For example, see Decision 63/2003/QĐ-UB, May 14, 2003, People’s Committee of Hà Nội.
8. Nguyễn Hữu Khiển, “Hè phố - tiếp cận quản lý và sự thay đổi của chính quyền đô thị” [Sidewalks: Toward Urban Government’s Change Management], *Tổ chức Nhà nước* [State Organization Magazine], July 1, 2008, http://tcnn.vn/news/detail/40396/He_pho_tiep_can_quan_ly_su_thay_doi_cua_chinh_quyen_do_thi.html.
9. Lê Hồng Giang, “Vỉa hè Việt Nam – ‘Kinh tế mặt tiền’ và ‘Kinh tế hàng rong’” [Vietnam Sidewalks: “Front-Street Economics” and “Vending Economics”], *SOHA*, March 21, 2017, <https://soha.vn/ong-le-hong-giang-via-he-viet-nam-kinh-te-mat-tien-va-kinh-te-hang-rong-20170320145056714.htm>.

10. Kim, *Sidewalk City*.
11. See Jensen, Peppard, and Vũ Thị Minh Thắng, “Di cư “Tuần hoàn””; Koh, *The Pavement as Civic Space*; Turner, Eidse, and Oswin, “Contesting Street Spaces”; Martin Rama, *Hà Nội một chốn rong chơi*, trans. Nguyễn Văn Tùng (Hà Nội: Thế Giới, 2014).
12. According to Decree 172/2013/ND-CP and Circular 04/2008/TT-BXD as amended and supplemented by Circular 16/2009/TT-BXD, sidewalks are part of urban roads (or streets) run by the state. However, people still consider the sidewalk in front of their house to be theirs. This view has existed for a long time and is legitimized by the care, use, and maintenance of personal activities in that sidewalk space.
13. See, especially, Kim, *Sidewalk City*.
14. Kim, *Sidewalk City*.
15. Koh, *Wards of Hanoi*, 9.
16. See Sarah Turner and Laura Schoenberger, “Street Vendor Livelihoods and Everyday Politics in Hanoi, Vietnam: The Seeds of a Diverse Economy?,” *Urban Studies* 49, no. 5 (2012): 1027–1044.
17. Kim, *Sidewalk City*.
18. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.
19. Lisa Barthelmes, “Dealing with Uncertainty: Itinerant Street Vendors and Local Officials in Hanoi,” in *Traders in Motion: Identities and Contestation in the Vietnamese Marketplace*, ed. Kirsten W. Endres and Ann Marie Leshkovich (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 129.
20. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).
21. Margaret Crawford, John Chase, and John Kaliski, *Everyday Urbanism* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1999).
22. Jane Gehl, *Cities for People* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2013).
23. Lisa Drummond, “Street Scenes: Practices of Public and Private Space in Urban Vietnam,” *Urban Studies* 37, no. 12 (2000): 2377–2391; Koh, *The Pavement as Civic Space*.
24. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.